

Assessing Group Work¹

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In Bulgaria in recent years, preconceptions about the nature of education have been breaking down: People have realized that the major task of schools today is to raise a generation of young citizens who will be able to clearly formulate and defend their opinions, positions, and ideals. In addition, teachers are trying to re-ignite students' interest in reading. In our classroom we have found that we can often achieve these goals through small group work.

In such groups students combine their skills and talents, and help one another develop their individual strengths as they work on their assignments. Through work in small groups, students

- become aware of their responsibilities to their group mates
- develop skills in communication and cooperation
- learn to make joint decisions.

As a result, students in our Bulgarian Language and Literature courses remain engaged in their work throughout the class period. Working collaboratively, they perfect their reading skills, develop independent thinking, and learn to reach consensus. They approach the text in two ways, by reading and by hearing it read, which allows for better comprehension. And for the most part, joint analysis of the text appears to lead to a deeper analysis, since in a group students have the opportunity to ask more questions, and can draw on more resources to organize the information.

Since 2003, we have participated in the RWCT program (Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking). In our lessons we employ diverse activities designed to stimulate thinking and help students process information more effectively. These strategies include brainstorming, dual-entry diary, the K-W-L Chart (I Know-I Want to know-I Learned) (Ogle, 1986), clustering, Venn diagrams, gallery walks, cinquain poems, and many others, all well-known to teachers who employ active learning methods in their classrooms. The creative character of these activities helps students feel like explorers, discovering new territories of knowledge.

There are always students who are reluctant to speak in class, but in a group setting even the quiet ones overcome their shyness and start to express themselves. Moreover, there is often dialogue between groups, which sometimes develops into debates. Such exchanges help students focus their attention on the problems they are discussing. Experience shows that knowledge acquired in this way is comprehensive and long-lasting. Working together, students have more opportunities to show their talents, and many learn to be more tolerant of each other and of differing viewpoints. Thus, we see new behavior patterns evolving through group work.

However, with all the advantages of group learning, at a certain point the teacher will inevitably face a serious question: How should students' work in groups be assessed?

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This question includes a whole set of sub-questions:

- How can group work in general be assessed?
- How should the group be graded if they worked well and completed the assignment, but some students did not contribute?
- What criteria should be used to assess the individual contributions of each student?
- How can assessment be made to serve as a stimulus for further improvement?
- How can the assessment process be made fair and objective?

This article describes our search for answers to all of these questions, in the context of our work with 8th–12th graders (aged 14–18) in Bulgarian Language and Literature courses. When we started to work on the assessment system three years ago, we realized that it had to include three major elements:

1. assessment of the work of the entire group
2. assessment of the work of individuals within the group, and
3. self-assessment.

Assessing the work of the whole group

We began by asking our students to complete a questionnaire regarding possible criteria for assessing group work. Their responses can be summarized as follows:

- *The teacher should question each group member individually.*
- *Each group should have an observer who monitors the work process.*
- *The group members' individual contributions must be taken into consideration.*
- *The grading should be individual, and should reflect each participant's individual contribution.*
- *Every group member should have an opportunity to assess the group's work, based on previously established criteria.* These assessment criteria, according to our students, should include:
 - *the ability to present information on the topic clearly, concisely, and completely*
 - *the breadth of coverage of the topic, and the quality of the analysis*
 - *a serious and conscientious approach to the issues*
 - *the quality of the arguments supporting the position*
 - *the clarity and attractiveness of the presentation*
 - *coordination and planning of the group work*
 - *the participation of all group members.*

Of course, initially these suggestions were not so clearly expressed, and we lacked a systematic approach for implementing them. As always, we found it helpful to hold a general discussion, in the course of which students' ideas were clarified and became more concrete. In the end we managed to develop a workable system for assessing both individual and group work, and also a system for self-assessment.

We usually divide a class into groups of 4–6 participants for group work: Our experience has shown such groups to be the most effective. The criteria for formation of the groups are important too. Initially groups may be formed randomly. If a group is successful, the teacher may give them an opportunity to work together for several lessons. Later, however, it is advisable to reconfigure the groups so that students from successful groups are inconspicuously placed in other groups, which can then benefit from their modeling. Thus the membership of the groups constantly changes.

The tasks assigned to the groups may be different: to define the characteristics of a hero; to compare heroes from two different books; to identify the symbols used by the author; to examine the image of a city or the role of nature in the artistic design of the novel. The nature of the task depends on the subject matter and on the educational focus of the lesson.

To make the assessment process relevant and accessible, even before we distribute assignments we appoint an *observer* for each group, whose task is to describe and evaluate the group's experience. Each group member takes a turn in the role of observer. When the assignments have been completed, the groups present the results of their work to the class, and then the observers report their findings, guided by the following list of questions:

- Is there an obvious leader in the group?
- Does the group have a thorough knowledge of the text?
- Do the group members work together in a coordinated fashion, or is everyone talking and offering suggestions at the same time?
- Do the group members listen to one another?
- How are group decisions reached? Jointly, by consensus? By compromise? Or does one person impose his or her opinion on the others?
- Does everyone participate in the discussion?
- Are individual opinions taken into account?
- Was the assignment finished on time?
- Would you say that this group worked effectively?
- Did the group work as a unified team?

We soon saw that, when assessing their team's work, observers generally tried to be objective and specific in their comments. A few excerpts from the observers' notes illustrate this point:

... the group lacks leadership...

... they have difficulty making a decision...

... there is not much going on...

... the participants give appropriate consideration to presenting the results of their work...

... it is hard to say whether or not they work together as a team...

... they have completed the assignment on time...

... I think that the group has been working effectively...

... there seems to be a lot of activity, but they are not accomplishing much...

... the group's suggestions are too general; they need to be more specific...

... while discussing the problem, the participants try to get to the basic issues...

... they work together toward an agreement...

... many examples from real life were cited...

... their discussion led to a thoughtful decision....

It was interesting to watch how the observers themselves worked. Summarizing their reports and comparing them with our own records, we concluded that most of the student observers

- were able to follow the activities of the group
- objectively assessed the contributions of the participants
- did a reasonably good job of judging the effectiveness of the group
- had no difficulty identifying the group leader
- were precise about monitoring time
- were able to overcome their own subjective preferences

However, they were not always able to evaluate the depth and completeness of the group's response to the assignment (here the assessment largely depends on the content knowledge of the observer).

Assessing individual performance within groups

Once we were satisfied with our approach to assessing group work, we shifted our focus to individual assessment. We tried to encourage students to think about how they could objectively evaluate the work of others. With the active participation of the students, we created a list of assessment criteria (see Table 1) and assessment charts for students to use in evaluating the work of their group mates (see Table 2). The assessment technique is very simple: the student enters the names of the other group members into the chart, and whenever a group mate's work corresponds to this or that criterion, writes the relevant number of points (negative or positive) next to the name. Usually we ask students to complete their individual assessment charts 10 minutes before the end of the lesson. Then the teacher collects

Table 3

Converting individual assessment results into traditional grades²

Group of 2 participants	Group of 3 participants	Group of 4 participants
Maximum total points – 18	Maximum total points – 36	Maximum total points – 54
18-17 points – 6	36-34 – 6	54-50 – 6
16-14 points – 5	33-29 – 5	49-42 – 5
13-10 points – 4	28-22 – 4	41-32 – 4
9-8 points – 3	21-18 – 3	31-27 – 3
Group of 5 participants	Group of 6 participants:	
Maximum total points – 72	Maximum total points – 90	
72-67 – 6	90-84 – 6	
66-55 – 5	83-70 – 5	
54-45 – 4	69-55 – 4	
44-36 – 3	54-45 – 3	

After each individual assessment session, we ask students to respond to a single question: Was the grade you received today a fair and objective reflection of your work in the group?

Here are some of their responses:

- I am pleased with the results. I think my group mates assessed me objectively. They were right not to give me the maximum number of points: I was not too good at presenting the group's work to the class.

- I was graded objectively. I know I earned a high grade, as did my whole group. Good work, good results.

- If my group gave me this low grade, then my work must not have been good enough.

- I think my grade today is realistic.

- I didn't get a fair grade, even though I worked hard and had a lot of ideas. During the break I even managed to re-read the text, searching for something that might be useful for the assignment. However, this is what the group decided, so this is my grade.

- In general I am pleased with my results, but I'm sure I could have done better.

- I see no problem with my grade. I'm glad you give us a chance to judge our own work and our classmates' work.

- The grade is correct, I think, but I am not pleased with myself.

- Assessment in our group was objective today,, the grades reflect reality. Everyone worked marvelously, so most of the grades are very high.

- It's great that we have a chance to grade each other, but of course we are not always objective. In fact, if you do not like someone in your group (even if she worked harder than the

others) you never give her the highest possible number of points. But I agree that this way of assessing group work is the best we've had so far.

1 In Bulgarian schools, a six-point grading system is used (editor's note).

2 In a group of two, each participant has to grade one partner, in a group of three—two partners, etc.

After analyzing the results of the individual assessments and the students' responses to our question about the fairness of the process, we came to the following conclusions:

- Initially, about 25% of the students were dissatisfied with the results of their individual assessments.

- Their discontent gave these students motivation to improve, and in subsequent group tasks they worked harder to achieve the set goals.

- In groups where the participants initially all gave each other very high grades, students gradually came to realize that the contributions of individual members were not equal, and that individual assessments should reflect what each participant actually contributed to the task.

The students were quick to accept this method of mutual individual assessment. However, we understood that there was still one important element missing from our system: self-assessment.

Self-assessment of individual contribution to group work

To help students objectively assess their own results, we again asked for student input, and discussed criteria by which group members could evaluate their own contributions to the work of the group.

Table 4 shows the evaluation chart that we created with the students. (Please note that this is a work in progress, subject to ongoing revision.)

Using this table, participants can independently convert the results of their own assessment into a traditional school grade (27–30 points correspond to a 6, 22–26 to a 5, 16–21 to a 4, and 10–15 points, to a 3).

Just three years after we began work on this new assessment system, we are already seeing positive results. This system has delivered clear benefits to both the students and the learning process. These include the following:

- Students learn to work together as a team.

- Students develop their communication skills, powers of observation, sense of responsibility, self-control, and self-discipline.

- Students learn to establish assessment criteria, and to assess themselves and each other objectively.

- Students acquire analytical skills, and learn to be both critical and self-critical.

Meeting the criterion Criterion	Always (3 points)	Sometimes (1 point)	Never (0 points)	Points
1. Before starting to work, I think through the assignment and how I will approach it.				
2. I have read the text carefully and can analyze it				
3. I state my ideas clearly				
4. I find convincing supporting arguments				
5. I am attentive to details that can help me analyze the text and formulate conclusions				
6. I listen to my group mates and respect their opinions				
7. I motivate other group members to work				
8. I cooperate with others				
9. I try to prevent group conflicts				
10. I do my best to complete the group assignment				

- Students share experiences and exchange opinions (which is important because knowledge acquired through dialogue with peers is more enduring).
- Students learn to make well-grounded decisions as a group.
- Even reticent or struggling students participate more.
- Peer assessment provides a stimulus for self-improvement.

We are confident that these skills acquired through group work will serve our students well in the future. Our assessment methods have aroused the interest of our colleagues, and now other teachers in our school and other local schools have adopted these methods for courses in philosophy, geography, history, and other subjects. Of course the technique described here is far from a perfect assessment system, and we continue to work to improve it. Nevertheless, it is already helping us address many educational tasks more effectively.

References

Ogle, D.M. (1986). K-W-L: A teaching model that develops active reading of expository text. *Reading Teacher*, 39, 564–570.